

Between(s)
and Beyond(s)
in Contemporary
Albanian Literature

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By

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-9755-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9755-6

*To my parents,
Bashkim and Violeta.
who gave me so much through my name*

*To Loran,
who knows how to read my name*

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PREFACE

Albanian literature is generally little known among academics in Europe, in the USA and in other areas of the world, although their interest in this literature is unquestionable and goes well beyond the work of the eminent Albanian writer Ismail Kadare, who is by far the most renowned representative of Albanian literature abroad. This book focuses on contemporary Albanian literature—mainly on poetry, considering the very important role this genre has continuously played in Albanian literature—and aims to analyze particular literary periods and representative poets following a comparative approach, among others.

The book consists of four studies/chapters, two of which are (slightly) revised versions of articles previously published in *Balkanistica* an academic journal published for the South East European Studies Association at the University of Mississippi, at Oxford, USA. They will be followed by two other chapters written exclusively for this volume. They all focus on Albanian literature during the second half of the twentieth century, on the way the communist regime influenced Albanian literature during this period and on some representative Albanian poets, while the book also addresses questions about the future of Albanian literature and other national literatures in today's globalizing era.

A focal point of the book will be the work of Martin Camaj, one of the key representative modern poets of Albanian literature, who lived and wrote in exile—completely excluded by any literary discourse within communist Albania—and two other dominant figures of Albanian contemporary literature, Fatos Arapi and Ali Podrimja. The book will dwell on those aspects of these writers' literary works that offer a fertile ground for further in-depth analysis of their poetry and of Albanian literature, as well as on the worldwide academic discussion on the role of the so called *small*, marginal, peripheral and semi-peripheral literatures in the wide scene of world literature.

The book will attempt to elaborate on the particular model of hermeticism and of confession offered by the aforementioned poets, models which are mostly grounded in the combination of different arts, fields of knowledge and discourses, on the very complex perceptions of the body, the nation, family relations, death, freedom and other aspects of

reality that are crucial to the existential condition of the lyrical self in poetry.

The book will make wide use of poetic texts in Albanian translated into English by the author or translations published in prestigious editions. However, it is important to emphasize that this book is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of the development of Albanian literature during, and at the end of, the twentieth century; nor is it a full and comprehensive panorama of Albanian literature's development. The book's purpose is to raise meaningful questions that point to the very interesting aspects of this literature that call for an in-depth study and also to further encourage the professional curiosity of academics who are interested in Albanian literature—in comparative literature and in world literature (studies)—but who might face the difficulty of having very limited available resources. This book will widely take into account the research conducted in this field by both Albanian and foreign scholars who have tried over the years to approach this literature, a literature written in a very specific language, which—similar to Greek—has no affiliation to other Indo-European languages and is spoken by a few million people, mostly in South East Europe but also in the Albanian Diaspora around the world. On the other hand, the book's approach, with its focus on comparative literature, world literature studies, and the perspective offered by these academic approaches for the so-called *small* or *marginal* literatures in the realm of European literatures, represents a different outlook compared to most of the approaches that have been mostly applied so far in the study of Albanian literature.

The first study in this book, *Comparative Literature, National Literatures and/in Globalism; the Case of Albanian Literature in the Twentieth Century (An Inevitable/y Unpretentious Introduction)* is an analysis of Albanian literature as one of the national literatures of Europe that might be called a *small* literature and the role this literature and other similar literatures have in the literary process today, at a time when literary studies seem to be widely influenced by the world-systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein and when concepts such as world literature, the world republic of letters, etc. have become part of the discourse on the meaning of literature in a globalizing world.

This chapter aims to introduce possible paths of study for Albanian Literary Studies seen through the perspective of comparative literature and other viewpoints related to world literature. Emphasis will be placed on language as an important factor, and the geographical, political and cultural particularities that turn Albanian literature into a fertile ground for further (comparative) research. This approach would help introduce

Albanian literature to an international readership and academe by visualizing Albanian Literary Studies as a discourse that constantly questions status quos in Albanian literature and in world literature as well.

Among the questions that the chapter endeavors to deal with are the aspects of Albanian literature that could be of interest considering the essentially interdisciplinary nature of comparative literature and why this interdisciplinarity would be fruitful to Albanian Literary Studies and to studies of literatures which are considered *small*, *marginal*, peripheral or semi-peripheral. Albanian Studies cannot afford to develop solely within the national borders or, worse, within state borders; nor can it afford to be self-centered and to disregard relationships to other arts, to history, philosophy, sociology, and other sciences. The comparative perspective, which stands at the heart of comparative literature, would foster the interaction of Albanian literature—and generally *small* literatures—with other literatures and cultures. This is a crucial precondition of reaching a deeper understanding of the development of Albanian literature as well as the literary process in today's globalizing world. Albanian literature will not be seen solely in the framework of South Eastern European literatures; it would become instead an active part of a large worldwide discourse on literature and culture, which comparativism has highly valued and practiced, especially since WWII and which is particularly important in the context of world literature today.

Our main thesis in this chapter is related to the need to focus on the (possible) position that national literatures occupy in today's global context where literary studies are widely influenced by political, economic and social factors. The place (and meaning) of national literatures, of text, of translation etc. in a globalizing world and the dangers they face, as well as the opportunities that emerge in this changing context, deserve utmost attention by scholars who need to focus even more now on the literatures that stand beyond those which are traditionally considered the *major/main* /*dominant* literatures (of the continent).

Chapter II, *Albanian Literature during the Establishment of the Communist Dictatorship (1945-1960)*, focuses on literature during the establishment of the communist regime in Albania, which is generally considered one of the most extreme of all the regimes in Eastern Europe, and which lasted from 1944 to 1991. The development of Albanian literature, particularly during the communist era, is still in the process of being studied and important contributions have been made over the years. However, a thorough analysis of this period in Albanian literature requires more time and effort either by Albanian scholars or by Albanologists from around the world. Thus, despite the work that has been done so far,

Albanian literature is still insufficiently known to foreign audiences. As for the period of the establishment of the communist regime, there are even fewer in-depth analyses available, although there is certainly fertile ground for study either of the Albanian context or for a comparative approach with other countries of the Bloc during the new political and social order of post-World War II Eastern Europe. The study of the main literary phenomena in Albanian literature during the communist period can offer significant contributions to the international academic discussion in this field.

The establishment of the communist regime was a very complex process and was unique for each of the countries in the Eastern Bloc. This chapter focuses on the establishment of communism in Albania and the consequences that it had for Albanian literature. Keeping in mind that Albania represents a very specific case in the Eastern European context, research on the relationship between literature and ideology in this country can nevertheless help to shed more light on how this relationship unfolded in the Bloc countries. Thus, this chapter aims to provide a synthesized view of Albanian literature during the first stages of the communist regime and how the encroachment of ideology into Albanian literature represents an extreme case of the violent imposition of ideological principles to literature. This imposition of ideology onto literature brought about critical distortions of the previous literary tradition as well as the entire literary process for the four following decades in Albania and significantly influenced the development of the country's literature during the years of political transition following the collapse of the regime in the early 1990s.

This chapter considers the following topics: (a) how the communist state operated during its early stages and the effects that the regime's extreme violence had in particular on Albanian writers and intellectuals; (b) the role of ideology and politics in literature, the methodology of socialist realism, and forms of censorship; (c) how the literary process and literary tradition were suddenly and violently interrupted after 1945; and (d) the construction of the new literature as an analogy with the "new communist man" in Albania.

Chapter III, *Reading the Palimpsest: The Poetry of Martin Camaj*, focuses on the analysis of the fundamental metaphysical concepts in one of the most important poetic volumes of the well-known Albanian poet whose literary activity spans the second half of the twentieth century, Martin Camaj. The metaphysical concepts in Camaj's poetry are directly connected to language, memory, the concept of origin, and thought. Through memory he analyses the origin of language and meaning, which is the starting point for a deeper understanding of time, identity and death

as part of an unavoidable ontological reality. I will analyze Camaj's poetry mainly through the elements of silence, voice, and the symbols of olive trees and water seen in the framework of the Albanian tradition in the Balkans and of the Arbëresh in Southern Italy, through the ancient Albanian perceptions of cosmogony and basic cryptic symbols. This chapter proposes that the poet analyses the human condition as a tragic division of the individual in space and time where his concepts of self and origin became particularly meaningful and the return to metaphysics unavoidable.

Chapter IV, *Confession and the Confessional in Albanian Poetry; the Poetry of Fatos Arapi and Ali Podrimja*, focuses on two key representatives of contemporary Albanian poetry, who wrote most of their literary work in two different cultural and political environments—Fatos Arapi and Ali Podrimja. The former is a central name in contemporary Albanian poetry. He belongs to the group of three main Albanian poets of the 1960s—together with Ismail Kadare and Dritëro Agolli.

The second poet, Ali Podrimja, lived and wrote in Kosovo and his poetry is among the most translated in Albanian poetry. The concepts of pain, suffering, body, as well as the unique melting of individual trauma and tragedy with the enormous social, national and human concerns that marked our civilization during the second half of the twentieth century are key features of Podrimja's most important volume of poetry "Lum Lumi".

This book is meant to offer both an introduction and a well-structured approach to Albanian literature and to address some of the problems that it presents in today's global context when national literatures, and especially the so called *small* literatures, have to reconsider their role and position in world literature. Therefore scholars in the field of comparative literature, world literature studies, East and South East European literatures, Albanian literature, Balkan studies, poetry studies, cultural studies, ethnic and multicultural studies, etc. could be part of the audience that will have a genuine interest in this book. The book could be helpful especially to those scholars specialized or specializing in the above fields that do not speak Albanian (yet) and have limited knowledge of the development of contemporary Albanian literature.

My hope is that after reading this book there will be many questions asked about Albanian literature. My goal is to help in raising these questions and to give the reader enough reasons to ask their own, undoubtedly more poignant questions about Albanian literature and the way this literature and other *small, marginal, peripheral* or semi-peripheral European—and non-European—literatures communicate with/in the context

of world literature in a time when (national) literature's place in the world seems to be constantly and significantly challenged.

Salamanca, Spain
Tirana, Albania, 2015-2016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following text is the result of 8 years of research in the field of Contemporary Albanian Literature and Comparative Literature. The years of extensive and intensive work on my PhD when I conducted research on literary theories and hermetic poetry in Italian literature (at the Università degli Studi di Pavia, Italy), on contemporary American literature and comparative literature (at the University of Turku, Finland) as well as the year after my dissertation defense when I conducted research work at Pennsylvania State University (State College, PA, USA), were crucial to the writing of this book. The following years of research and lectures at Abo Akademi University in Turku (Finland in 2013) and at the University of Salamanca (Spain in 2015) helped to open new windows and give more insight on issues that I attempt to address in this book.

I am deeply grateful to several people who have been and still are to me colleagues, friends, professors—whose classes I had the opportunity to visit as an invited scholar—and academic advisors. This book has benefited either directly or indirectly from their support and suggestions. I'd like to thank in particular Professor Donald D. Dyer at the University of Mississippi at Oxford, Professor Djelal Kadir, Edwin Earl Sparks Professor of Comparative Literature and Professor Emeritus at Pennsylvania State University, Dennis J. Schmidt, Charlotte D. Eubanks, Nergis Erturk, and Sophia McClennen (Penn State University), Anthony Johnson and Roger Sell (Abo Akademi University), Viorica Patea and Ana Maria Manzananas (University of Salamanca), Pirjo Ahokas (University of Turku, Finland) and Clelia Martignoni (Università degli Studi di Pavia, Italy).

My closest friend and colleague Dr. Loran Gami has been walking every inch of this road with me, as always since we met. He has also proofread almost everything I've written and published in the last years, including the second and third chapters of this book. Words are not enough to say thank you, so it will take our whole life together to say it all.

I am especially thankful to my parents for having been visionary, gracious and supportive through my many years of study when my love for literature and search for knowledge often took me to places distant from them. They have always been with me; it couldn't happen otherwise since syllables of their names form my own name.

I'm deeply thankful to these people and to others whose names I wouldn't be able to write while fully expressing my gratitude; each in different ways, they opened for me new perspectives from which to approach literature and all that it represents. I hope this book will be somehow close to what their names and support deserve it to be.

CHAPTER ONE

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, NATIONAL LITERATURES AND/IN GLOBALISM: THE CASE OF ALBANIAN LITERATURE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY (AN INEVITABLE/Y UNPRETENTIOUS INTRODUCTION)

1. In the Beginning There Were... Questions

I can hardly think of any other way to approach literary issues except through reminding that no matter where one starts, there would be questions to face. There are things to ask, to question and to discuss. One given literature raises far too many questions and makes it almost impossible to formulate the most significant ones right at the beginning of a chapter, let alone when one's goal is to approach the realm of comparative—and the process of comparing—literature(s).

Discussion on comparative literature is inextricably connected to that on world literature (studies)¹ and vice versa. As is widely maintained, the relationship between the two has often been quite ambiguous and has

¹ A recent and very significant contribution in the field of world literature studies is *Text, Translation, Transnationalism; World Literature in the 21st Century Australia*. Ed. Peter Morgan. (Victoria: Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd., 2016). I'm indebted to Professor Peter Morgan (University of Sydney, Australia) for giving me the opportunity to read the book soon after it was published and to think on its very challenging and insightful perspectives on world literature (studies). My future work and any reprint of this book will further benefit from *Text, Translation, and Transnationalism*.

required in depth analysis of the literary process,² but regardless of where we aim to get with our analysis I believe we will need to recall Goethe's understanding of the term world literature, and the two views on world literature that have become generally recognized. These two views are world literature as the sum of all literatures in the world (either national or individual), and the selective concept that sees world literature as the world's classics which are constantly read and appreciated as the main works that reach beyond linguistic, temporal or cultural borders in order to become a universal inheritance of human civilization.³ It is essential to emphasize that there are also views on world literature that consider it as neither the canon of masterworks nor a way of reading,⁴ but as a system structured on inequality rather than on difference.⁵ It is also a fact that since the early nineties in American universities there appeared two main lines of approach while comparative literature started to transform into world literature. One line focused on seeking models under which to subsume the variety of the world's literatures, while the other line focused on seeking acknowledgment of the uniqueness of the individual literary work.⁶ Theoretical concepts of world literature have been widely elaborated over the years and it is beyond the reach of this chapter to cover them in all their breadth and complexity. Nevertheless, it would be useful to highlight some of the changes that have happened at least in recent decades regarding the meaning and the phenomena of world literature. One of the very significant changes is that:

World literature has exploded in scope during the past decade. No shift in modern comparative study has been greater than the accelerating attention

² My concept on literary processes considers also the concept of the eminent Slovak comparatist and literary theorist Dionyz Durisin in his *Theory of Literary Comparatistics* (Bratislava: Slovak Academy of Science), 1984.

³ See Robert Gafrik, "The Notion of World Literature," *World Literature Studies*, 1 [18] (2009): 28.

⁴ See among others David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), and Vilashini Cooppan, "Ghosts in the Disciplinary Machine: the Uncanny Life of World Literature," *Comparative Literature Studies* 41 (2004), 10-36.

⁵ See Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 January-February (2001): 54-68.

⁶ See Peter Morgan, "World Literature Studies and the Transnational Turn," *Text, Translation, Transnationalism; World Literature in 21st Century Australia*. (Victoria: Australian Scholarly Publishing, Pty Ltd, 2016), 1.

to literatures beyond masterworks by the great men of the European great powers.⁷

In such a context we can agree that just as the great power perspective in literary studies excludes *minority* literatures from the map of world literature, the same danger is represented by cosmopolitan multiculturalism,⁸ thus regardless of many factors, *minority* literatures seem to be directly and maybe mostly influenced by any development in the discourse of world literature. Charles Bernheimer maintained that even within European literatures there are usually taken in consideration three to four dominant literatures, and even Italian literature—with the exception of Dante—is often marginalized. Regardless of the cause of marginalization he calls all these marginalized literatures *minority literatures*. They are all known through translation, and thus a more direct approach to them is required.⁹

If we consider this definition, then one of the *minority* literatures in the wide context of European literatures and which is mainly known through translation is Albanian literature. As I am reluctant to use this categorization—especially because it requires a more detailed designation of the term marginalization and a specific attention to the meaning, nature and causes of marginalization for each national literature—I will try to approach several issues on Albanian literature in the context of the relationship between national literature(s) and world literature(s)—although both terms *national* and *world literature* require explanations of their own.

I can hardly think of any other words that can better describe the development of Albanian literature, especially during the second half of the twentieth century and presently in the twenty-first, than these two: between and beyond. Albanian literature has found itself between the home and the world; between the need to remember and to preserve its culture and language and the need to be translated; between extreme functionalization for propagandistic and political purposes and the natural tendency to explore new paths of literary art. Eventually, Albanian literature developed as a rich and complex search between past and present, and between the Self and the Other. These many between are

⁷ David Damrosch, "World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age," in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. By Haun Sassy, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 43.

⁸ See David Damrosch, "Rebirth of a Discipline," *Comparative Critical Studies* 3 BCLA (2006): 99.

⁹ "The Bernheimer Report," in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 44-45.

displayed and developed in various forms—especially during the second half of the twentieth century—but in all these forms they suggest that this *small* South Eastern European literature has a story to tell, while it surely has a history of its own that is multifaceted, appealing and sometimes troubled in some respects. Just as the language in which it was written, Albanian literature has been little known beyond its national and linguistic borders. Thus, while it has existed for centuries in many between it has also developed—especially for several decades during the twentieth century—with the constant concern of what's beyond: beyond the self, beyond the home, beyond the border, beyond our own language and eventually meditating on what is the very meaning of *beyond* in/for Albanian literature, either under communism or presently in the globalization era.

In today's global context Albanian literature faces similar questions to those faced by other national and *non-dominant* literatures. What is the meaning and the role of categories such as context, borders, close or distant reading, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, (global) translation, semi-peripheral and peripheral literatures, national literature, world literature etc.? The present and future development of these *non-dominant* literatures seems to be closely related to the way they contextualize themselves in the larger realm of world literature in today's globalizing world. National literatures similar to Albanian literature that represent even more complex cultural and social contexts seem to constantly ask for a *reinventing* of literary study, for a re-evaluation of the local and the national, and they seem to bring new arguments to the discussion on how we can approach literatures which have a different process of development compared to the *dominant* (European) literatures. Each of these literatures is significantly different from the other, while they represent alternative literary processes compared to the *dominant* literatures. They are often written in languages spoken by fewer people and eventually the question is, how can we compare these literatures? Furthermore, on what basis can we practice comparativism in order not to further marginalize these literatures, especially since the points of departures for the comparative approach are often the so-called *dominant* literatures? Is there—and in such case what would be—a difference between the way these questions are formulated when referring to *non-dominant*, *small*, *semi-peripheral* or *peripheral* European literatures and when they address *non-dominant* literatures beyond the borders of Europe?

Considering the rich network of cultural communication and interaction that has taken place in Albania for millennia, it could be maintained that comparativism could help to study Albanian

literature—and other national literatures which stand far from the literary centers of world literature—in a way that challenges the literary geopolitics of today's world and calls more attention to the complexity of the literary process. It could be a significant attempt to help bring *small* national literatures (of Europe and beyond) to wider academic attention. Comparative literature and world literature studies would emphasize the uniqueness of literary works as well as the type and degree of communication between them and the diverse affinities of works and of the literary phenomena within the literary, social, cultural, political and artistic background in the broadest sense. There are several aspects of Albanian literature—concerning topics, style, literary profiles of several writers, cultural and political context and references, etc.—that would very much appeal also to comparatists who support Alain Badiou's perspective on the communication between literary works.

Albanian literature represents a fertile ground for research as it finds itself between the necessity of reading world literature and of being read by/in world literature. Like other so-called *small* literatures, Albanian literature can ask significant, specific as well as uncomfortable questions about the extent to which translation can and should be the (only) way to approach these literatures—recalling several issues discussed over the last decades by comparatists. It raises its own specific questions as well as joins in other persistent questions asked by *non-dominant* literatures about the meaning and consequences of globalization when it comes to literatures that are positioned far from the cultural centers either in Europe, in North America or in other centers in the world. How can they—effectively—make themselves known when there seems to be little geopolitical interest in their cultures and languages? I strongly believe that (contemporary) Albanian literature openly asks most of these questions and others that need to be accurately formulated and which I'll hopefully address in this chapter and in the others that follow.

Borders, limitations, stereotypes, translation and other social and political factors that have influenced the sometimes illusive (self)perception of Albanian literature, like many other *small* literatures, are among those issues that Albanian literature has faced in its development, especially during the second half of the twentieth century and presently. These are some of the many between(s) that Albanian literature deals with and that define this literature, while it has also aimed to surpass and look beyond them. Therefore, research on Albanian literature can shed light on the indisputable voice and questions raised by national literatures in a globalizing world. Although quite disfavored by the political and economical asymmetry of the present literary

geopolitics—often noticed also in the level of translatability of these literatures—they are undeniable literary and cultural facts that can help comparatists in practicing their challenging task.

In her book *The Translation Zone*, Emily Apter maintains:

Translation studies has always had to confront the problem of whether it best serves the ends of perpetuating cultural memory or advancing its effacement. A good translation, as Walter Benjamin famously argued, makes possible the afterlife of the original by jumping the line between the death of the source language and its futural transference to a target. This death/life aporia leads to split discourses in the field of translation studies: while translation is deemed essential to the dissemination and preservation of textual inheritance, it is also understood to be an agent of language extinction. For translation, especially in a world dominated by the languages of powerful economies and big populations, condemns minority tongues to obsolescence, even as it fosters access to the cultural heritage of “small” literatures, or guarantees a wider sphere of reception to selected, representative authors of minoritarian traditions.¹⁰

Since Albanian literature is written in a language spoken by only a few million people, mainly in Europe, and has no affinities to other European languages, it is obviously important for scholars of the field to investigate the role of translation as a medium that would grant more access to this literature. On the other hand, it makes us ask whether translation would also help to preserve cultural memory and Albanian literature and culture itself, especially considering some of its most particular aspects. Seeing that Apter refers to the translation zone as “applying to diasporic language communities”,¹¹ Albanian literature could offer an interesting case in point to comparatists through one of its most important branches, which is the literature of the Arbëresh community in southern Italy, and which will be addressed again later in this article. The literature of the Arbëresh is written in a version of Albanian language from the Late Middle Ages period. How will translation preserve this particularity? Can we even talk of translation in this case? How and to what extent does untranslatability apply to Albanian literature and most particularly to this part of Albanian literature, considering the various and dominant ideologies of reception and factors of readability that help a literary work gain visibility in today’s world? A definition of untranslatability such as the one found in Emily Apter’s *The Translation Zone* could prove useful:

¹⁰ Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone, A New Comparative Literature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Untranslatability was also a term that could describe the side effects of an international publishing industry that favors certain countries and specific kinds of writing. Here I focused on a number of interrelated problems: the marketing of national literature, the politics of publishing (with emphasis on the dominance of Anglophone or standard-language publishing houses), and the impact of an internationalized aesthetics that gives special treatment to translation-friendly prose and artistic genres.¹²

The issues related to Albanian literature and the questions they raise also referring to untranslatability are to some extent similar to those asked by other *small*, semi-peripheral or peripheral literatures in Europe and beyond. Probably the fact that Albanian literature is one of the European literatures—despite how much this term requires analysis on its own—that has been little known to the world, especially before Ismail Kadare published his works abroad, makes it a curious case for further investigation of what it means for authors from these *small* national literatures to attempt to have a voice in the cultural centers of the world.

Since the rise of the vernacular literatures in Europe there has been a deep divide between writers working in major languages and literatures and their counterparts using so-called minor languages for minor literatures. The former could automatically assume that when they wrote for their home public they would also reach a wider “world” public. They were writing for the world when writing about home, without having to do anything extra. The latter would almost equally automatically resign themselves to writing about home, for an exclusive home public. Still, authors in minor languages/literatures ambitious to enter upon the scene of world literature could use a strategy of drawing on multiple legacies to reach as wide and broad, and as international as possible a public, and thus consciously invite dissemination beyond their original linguistic or cultural habitat, usually through translation into the dominant language or languages of the moment.¹³

Practicing comparative literature, then, acquires even more significance and exposes us to more complex multiple factor equations. While trying to examine the way a writer—Mark Twain—can write about “home” in a

¹² Ibid., 9.

¹³ Theo D’Haen, “Major Languages, Minor Literatures, Multiple Legacies,” in *Towards a Global Literature/Verso una letteratura globalizzata*, ed. Tim Parks & Edoardo Zuccato (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 2013), 11.

“national” yet at the same time a “world” fashion,¹⁴ or that of an opposite approach –Maryse Conde’s–Theo D’Haen maintains:

If at the time of writing his most famous novel, widely regarded as foundational for his national literature, Mark Twain still found it necessary to appeal to a continental European legacy to anchor his work in world literature, we see that with Condé the situation has been completely reversed, and it is the “Anglo-Atlantic” legacy that holds out the possibility of adherence to world literature.¹⁵

What does this fact have to tell nowadays about *small* literatures of Europe and the world? Once again, we can’t escape the need to elaborate on the meaning or the definition of world literature. Based on recent scholarly work, world literature is regarded as a global phenomenon, and sometimes it is even seen as a cultural expression of an emerging ‘world system’,¹⁶ considering Immanuel Wallerstein’s terms. And there are also perceptions according to which:

More expansively still, world literature can be considered to be the sum total of the world’s literatures from every period since the invention of writing. Yet any view of the world is a view from somewhere, and in practical terms, world literature is experienced very differently in different places.¹⁷

What is the view of the world (literature) from a periphery, from a so-called *small* literature that is known mainly through the work of one famous writer and almost exclusively through translation–sometimes not even from the original but from a second language? This is the case of Albanian literature. Although several Albanian authors have published one or more works in other languages, Ismail Kadare is the only writer known worldwide and his works have been translated into some 45 languages.¹⁸ However, these translations are sometimes not from the original in Albanian but from their translation into French–by the eminent Albanian translator Jusuf Vrioni. This is not an insignificant detail either with regard to literature in general or to Albanian literature particularly. What questions does this literature raise and which questions does it seem to

¹⁴ Ibid., 18.

¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

¹⁶ See David Damrosch, “Comparative World Literature”. Accessed September 30, 2015: http://www.academia.edu/15065635/Comparative_World_Literature.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See Bashkim Kuçuku, *Kadare në gjuhët e botës* (Tirana: Onufri, 2016).

offer answers to? What is the dialogue that it aims to have or can achieve with other literatures, with world literature or with any of the *hegemonic* literatures? What characteristics would this dialogue have while it is expected to be carried out mostly in translation? Would it even be a (real) dialogue? The last questions become interesting especially if we remind ourselves that:

Translations have generally flowed “downstream” from hegemonic powers and metropolitan centers to peripheral or colonized regions, with much less transnational traffic “upstream” from the periphery to political and cultural centers of power.¹⁹

Instead of answering any of these questions, I keep thinking of the many other questions that they seem to encourage almost in an inevitable sequence, especially when it comes to translation. As David Damrosch maintains, translation studies today emphasize the dynamic interaction of national literatures and the international circulation of works because, as we know, minor literatures’ traditions are widely influenced by translation. However, as Pascale Casanova has maintained, in her *World Republic of Letters*, minor literatures can also influence the revitalization of the literary life of cultural centers.²⁰ Therefore, questions keep rising, representing persistent challenges and maybe even risks of other/further crises in comparative literature—though both are two of the most exciting and typical aspects of comparative literature.

When referring to Albanian literature, it becomes even more challenging to answer any of these questions. This is mainly due to the very limited familiarity of the international readership and academe with this literature. Should the relatively limited number of speakers of a language determine the access of a literature to an international readership? To what extent is this inevitable? How? *In the beginning there were questions* and probably that’s what the reader will find even at the end of each part of this book.

2. Between Past and Present, Visions and Re-visions

Albanian literature is written mainly in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro, but also in the Diaspora in Italy, in Germany, France, the

¹⁹ David Damrosch, “Translational and National Literature,” in *A Companion to Translation Studies*, First Edition, ed. by Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2014).

²⁰ See *Ibid.*, 350.

USA, etc. It represents a complex literary view on account of the many political, historical and social factors contributing to its development not only in the last 50 years of the twentieth century but also during the five centuries of its development in the written form. Due also to a relatively late development compared to other literatures in the continent, Albanian literature represents a quite different literary process. Many of the literary movements that were at their peak in European literatures appeared (much) later in Albanian literature and some of them did not even have all the distinctive features that characterized them in the literatures of other countries. Despite the fact that one of the main representatives of world literature in the second half of the twentieth century is an Albanian writer—Ismail Kadare—and despite the fact that many Albanian poets and writers—such as Martin Camaj, Luljeta Lleshanaku, Ali Podrimja et al.—have already been introduced to the international reader through translations, Albanian literature is not recognized or read extensively abroad. This fact is due to different reasons that surely deserve attention but which we wouldn't be able to cover in this book, let alone in one chapter. However, the potential of Albanian literature is quite evident and it has much to offer to the overall discussion on (comparative) literature and world literature today.

Whether written in Albania, Kosova or elsewhere, Albanian literature is young and dynamic, reflecting a culture quite unique in Europe. But perhaps no European literature has been so neglected by Western readers, a neglect fostered by the lack of translations, of specialists in Albanian, and, in the second half of the twentieth century, by Albania's political isolation. If Edward Gibbon's remark about Albania is still valid, the real *terra incognita* is Albanian literature.²¹

Indeed, it is not a largely known fact that important urban centers in Albania existed several centuries B.C., but the complex historical background has influenced the documentation of Albanian language. The first written texts of Albanian literature that have been found so far belong to the fifteenth century and the first complete work belongs to the sixteenth century—"The Missal" by the catholic monk Gjon Buzuku. The systematic syntaxes and the clear and coherent grammatical features of this text give reason to believe that the Albanian language has had a previous tradition of its written form.

²¹ "Lightning from the Depths: an Anthology of Albanian Poetry" Ed. and trans. from the Albanian by Robert Elsie and Janice Mathie-Heck (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008). <http://www.elsie.de/en/books/b53.html>.

The first complete texts in Albanian that have been found are creative translations of the Bible and original poems mainly with religious content. The first Albanian writers were catholic priests, mainly from the northern regions of Albania. This is usually considered in Albanian Studies as the Period of the Old Albanian Literature.²² It was followed in the eighteenth century by the Alamiado literature that was the first to bring laic themes into Albanian literature—although religious themes were obviously present as well—and was mostly focused on poetry and on translations from Persian literature. It was mainly centered in central and southern Albania.

The third most important literary period, and a cornerstone in the development of the history of Albania as a nation and of Albanian literature, is Romanticism, which developed in the nineteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century. During this period poetry achieved a high level of elaboration and other genres such as the novel, drama, short story, etc. appeared or enjoyed broader development. This period was followed by modernism in the 1930s until the mid-1940s, which included signs of hermeticism, symbolism, realism, etc. Unfortunately this literary tradition was violently interrupted at the end of the 1940s by the imposition of socialist realism as the only literary method allowed when the communist rule was set in Albania.

The communist regime in Albania lasted for almost 50 years and has often been considered the harshest in Europe, raising an unprecedented mechanism of censorship at the end of the twentieth century²³ which influenced every sphere of life. Literature and writers were among those

²² See *Historia e letërsisë shqipe* (Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e Republikës së Shqipërisë, 1983). Presently there is no available comprehensive text of the History of Albanian Literature that can be accurately referred to. The texts of Literary History published by the Academy of Science of Albania in 1959 and 1983, suffered the pressure of politics over Albanian literature, over academic thought and over all the intellectual circles in the country during the communist regime. Thus these texts suffer political bias. During the last 2-3 decades there have been made significant contributions in the study of the history of Albanian literature either by Albanian scholars—among the most important ones being Rexhep Qosja's voluminous *Romanticism*—or by eminent albanologists abroad but they are generally focused on one literary period, on a particular literary genre, etc., or they are too panoramic and lack the required scientific accuracy; thus there is still enormous work to be done in this respect.

²³ See Robert Elsie, *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare* (Pejë: Dukagjini, 2001). See also Robert Elsie, "Albanian Literary History: A Communist Primeur" in *History of the Literary Cultures of East and Central Europe: Junctions and Disjunctions in the 19th and 20th Century Vol.III*, ed. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007). 409-411.

who had to suffer some of the most severe forms of punishment. This regime and its extreme censorship which was exercised against literature led to four main consequences that strengthened both the war of classes in Albania and the state control over literature and society as a whole. As I've mentioned in previous works,²⁴ these consequences were: (a) the (often extreme) persecution of writers who opposed the regime and socialist realism, which was the only literary method allowed by the state; (b) the denigration and even disappearance of literary work by dissenting writers, whose literary output was banned until the 1990s and their names were never mentioned in any of the literary studies by Albanian scholars; (c) the tragic damage inflicted to the Albanian literary tradition; and (d) the role of several Albanian writers in the state apparatuses and especially the possible collaboration with the secret service, an issue currently of great interest to the general public and academicians alike, and one which touches upon another delicate topic, that of the opening of the communist secret service files.

While aiming to analyze the extremist nature of the communist regime in Albania I have mentioned in previous works that during communism even the concept of dissidence is hard to understand and compare with other countries of the Eastern Bloc. Indeed,

[...] it was hard even to think of dissidence in political terms, i.e. in the same way that writers such as Solzhenitsyn, Herbert, Kundera and the like can be spoken of as being part of the literary dissidence in their respective countries—but we can speak of opponents of Socialist Realism and of what often is referred to as aesthetical dissidence. Political persecution in communist Albania against writers, artists, intellectuals, scientists, common citizens, and foreign citizens living in Albania, had different forms. Tortures inflicted on the victims in particular were considered by Amnesty International as extreme violations of human rights (Amnesty International, 1984), and even genocide. It still seems that the only document that qualifies as an open dissident act in Albania is the Kasëm Trebeshina's *Pro memoria* sent to the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha on October 3, 1953 and that precedes even Solzhenitsyn's *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*.²⁵

²⁴ See Bavjola Shatro, "Literature and Ideology: Aesthetical and Political Aspects of Albanian Literature in Dictatorship" in *The International Journal of Humanities*, Issue 8 (2012): 95-108.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

While Solzhenitsyn, in his letter, clearly argued about the heavy burdened ideology—which was a dead ideology²⁶—imposed on the nation, Albanian writer Kasëm Trebeshina²⁷ openly—and in a way that I find extremely bold and very uncommon considering the nature of communism in Albania—put the blame on state ideology for the ruin of the Albanian nation, and explicitly accused the communist regime of being knee-deep in blood and crime.²⁸ A debate arose among Albanian intellectuals and literary critics on the authenticity of this letter²⁹ and it has been hard to find the required documentary evidence to entirely refute or accept its authenticity. This open letter of Kasëm Trebeshina would stand out as (maybe) the first act of dissidence in the communist countries of Eastern Europe in the second half of the twentieth century.³⁰

In the context of Albanian literature written during communism, there were also writers who wrote and had little or no communication with the reader of their time, such as Zef Zorba.³¹ These were authors that fit in aesthetic directions which developed at the beginning of the twentieth century, or the 1930s. These writers were either unknown to the public or purposefully deleted from every text of history of Albanian literature until the collapse of communism in the 1990s. They were mentioned—if they were ever mentioned—(only) in dismissive and derogatory treatments in the books of history of Albanian Literature.

²⁶ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Letter to the Soviet Leaders* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 15.

²⁷ Kasëm Trebeshina is a prolific author of contemporary Albanian literature who has been part of the political establishment during communism but also one of his victims as he suffered many years in prison and his literary work was not published in communist Albania for decades

²⁸ Elsie, *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare*, 404-405.

²⁹ See Sadik Bejko, *Disidentët të rremë* (Tiranë: Shtëpia Botuese 55, 2007).

³⁰ Shatro, "Literature and Ideology: Aesthetical and Political Aspects of Albanian Literature in Dictatorship", 98.

³¹ Zef Zorba (1920-1993) is practically a unique poet of contemporary Albanian literature whose only book appeared post mortem, after the fall of communism and after having been written in secret for about 40 years in Communist Albania. Zef Zorba is a key representative of modernism and hermeticism in Albanian poetry and his work waits to be discovered and thoroughly analyzed by scholars. A more detailed study on his poetry and references to Albanian scholars who have written on Zorba's poetry—especially Sabri Hamiti—are in my "Zef Zorba në letërsinë shqipe" (*Zef Zorba in Albanian Literature*) paper presented in the National Conference: "Marginalized Authors in Albanian Literature" organized by the National Centre for Albanian Studies in Tirana, 2014.

Considering this very complex background, Albanian literature developed between different literary and political contexts: it was written (a) in communist Albania, either by socialist realist authors, or others who succeeded in avoiding the realist socialism in part of their work, or even by those who wrote but of course couldn't publish by that time; (b) in the Diaspora by Albanian writers who escaped communist Albania and lived in Germany, the USA, Italy, etc.; (c) in Southern Italy where it has been written for more than 4 centuries by the Arbëresh community; and (d) in the regions of former Yugoslavia such as Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro. Since Albanian literature developed and is still written in different literary, social and political contexts, it grows between different literary and cultural worlds, and beyond state borders.

Contemporary Albanian literature and especially poetry is a fertile ground for in-depth comparative research. The role of memory in preserving identity and language is one of the main poetic concerns in the poetry of several contemporary Albanian poets, one of the most important ones being Martin Camaj. In Camaj's poetry one finds reason to maintain what Djelal Kadir—in his *Memos from the Besieged City*—says about the relationship between culture and space-time, when referring to Nicholas of Cusa:

Time being corrosive, renders culture vulnerable to time's depredations. It falls to culture—space, then, to compensate for what is lost to time. And memory, in all its leaps and lapses, becomes the instrument for that recovery...³²

In contemporary Albanian literature, Martin Camaj is one of the poets who best embodies the culture of remembrance, of remembering and of recalling while he lived and wrote abroad after escaping from communist Albania. In his poetic perceptions one finds a way to be highly detached from the everyday sequences of contemporary life and still refers strongly to these very aspects of our daily experiences. In previous works³³ I have focused on the ontological aspects of the poetry of Camaj and other contemporary Albanian poets such as Azem Shkreli, Ali Podrimja and Agron Tufa, trying to analyze the ontological context of their poetry and their genuine perspective on the relationship between the thing and the

³² Djelal Kadir, *Memos from the Besieged City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 65.

³³ See Bavjola Shatro, *Fjala dhe ontologjia në poezinë bashkëkohore; realiteti poetik i Martin Camajt, Azem Shkrelit, Ali Podrimjes, dhe Agron Tufës* (Tirana: Dita 2000, 2012).